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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000235

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [RP](#) [NO](#)

SUBJECT: NO SIGN OF PROGRESS IN PEACE TALKS WITH COMMUNISTS

REF: 09 MANILA 1645 (GOVERNMENT TO RESUME TALKS)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Leslie A. Bassett,
reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Norwegian peace talks facilitator Vegar Brynildsen told us on February 3 that a failed agreement to restart formal talks between the Philippine government and the communist National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) demonstrated the waning influence of self-exiled communist leader Jose Maria Sison in the NDFP. Brynildsen was unsure who in the NDFP held ultimate policymaking authority. Brynildsen anticipated no significant progress in peace talks with the communists prior to the Philippine election in May, but Norway remains prepared to facilitate talks for the next administration. Leftists remain concerned about human rights abuses. Brynildsen believed Philippine leftists would most favor Senators Villar and Legarda in the coming election; separately a Villar ally suggested high-ranking military officers have been uneasy about Villar's association with leftists. End Summary.

SISON CAN'T DELIVER TALKS

¶2. (S) Norwegian Special Envoy Vegar Brynildsen met on February 3 with poloffs to discuss Norwegian efforts to facilitate peace talks between the Philippine government and the communist National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). Brynildsen said Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) co-founder Jose Maria Sison held a four-eyes meeting with Presidential Peace Advisor Annabelle Abaya somewhere in the Netherlands at the end of November. (Strictly protect -- Brynildsen cautioned that discussion of this meeting could call into question the discretion of the Norwegian facilitators.) At that meeting, the two agreed to hold formal talks in Oslo in December. It soon became clear to Brynildsen, however, that the NDFP leadership in the Philippines refused to abide by Sison's commitment to formal talks.

¶3. (C) This development showed the Norwegians that Sison, who has been self-exiled in the Netherlands since 1987, is no longer "calling the shots" for the communist side, but, rather, needs further approval from Philippine-based figures. Brynildsen said he found it a "real challenge" to work as facilitator not knowing the inner workings of the NDFP and who held ultimate policymaking authority on the communist side. Normally, the Norwegian government insists on meeting with the top leaders of both sides before agreeing to act as an international facilitator. Tangentially, Brynildsen remarked that he was not positively impressed with the

quality of Philippine government intelligence on the NDFP.

NO NEAR-TERM BREAKTHROUGH

14. (C) Brynildsen was confident no breakthrough in the peace talks with the NDFP would occur before the Philippine election in May. Nevertheless, he was pleased the Philippine government managed to keep tensions with the communists low rather than taking a more confrontational approach. The Norwegian government would remain available to the parties after the election, Brynildsen said. The NDFP desired a continued Norwegian role, and all relevant actors (NFI) had told Brynildsen that they viewed the Norwegians as providing a useful channel of communication.

15. (C) Brynildsen said Sison had been very pleased with the removal of his name from the EU's list of formally designated terrorists. This development had not in any way influenced the peace process, however.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS REMAIN

16. (C) Explaining that he met regularly in the Philippines with a wide range of civil society representatives, Brynildsen claimed the political left remained very concerned about extrajudicial killings. Leftists claimed that murders continued, but the killers disposed of the bodies in such a way that these could be categorized as disappearances rather than extra-judicial killings. (Comment: While we do not

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doubt that leftists remain genuinely concerned, we have not detected a recent rise in disappearances -- see recent years' Country Reports on Human Rights for the Philippines. End Comment.)

PRESIDENTIAL RACE

17. (C) Brynildsen opined that the election of presidential candidate Manuel Villar might prove conducive to peace talks with the NDFP. Villar appeared willing to negotiate with leftists, and the NDFP had taken positive note of some of his public statements about human rights and income distribution. Brynildsen also remarked that Sison "loves" Villar's running mate, Senator Loren Legarda, although Brynildsen did not know precisely why Legarda appealed to Sison.

18. (C) Separately, we asked close Villar ally Ronnie Zamora, minority leader in the House of Representatives, if the Villar camp worried about right-wing anxiety arising from Villar's Nacionalista Party including far-left candidates Satur Ocampo and Liza Masa on its senatorial slate. Zamora said "every General in town" had expressed concern about Villar's interactions with the left. Zamora believed this anxiety would not prove significant, though. He explained to anyone concerned that the Nacionalistas had a balanced senatorial slate that included right-wingers such as Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., and that Villar's outreach to the left was pragmatic, as Ocampo and Masa could likely deliver approximately two million votes.

COMMENT

19. (C) The Philippine government and armed forces generally consider the communist threat to be more serious than that posed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Yet the Arroyo administration appears to have shown greater interest in making progress toward an agreement with the MILF than in pursuing talks with the NDFP. It is unclear to us whether this focus is because the MILF's agenda appears less threatening to the core interests of the Manila-based elite; because the MILF's leadership is more coherent and decisive

than the communists'; or because there is greater international interest in seeing a resolution to the conflict with the Moros.

BASSETT